Editorial

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Whilst educators are increasingly making use of technology to assist their learners, albeit slowly in places, the 'traditional' classroom/lecture theatre is still the norm for many. However, with far greater numbers of students coming into higher education these days, dealing with large numbers poses particular challenges as we seek to engage with our learners. This is perhaps made more difficult for those of us who are but a speck at the front of the lecture theatre, often obscured still further by a console centre, as some 800 or more students sit in a dimmed room. The word 'theatre' conveys with it the sense of performance, and it is all too easy for educators, on their 'stage' at the front of the 'theatre', to see it as such. We step onto that stage for our 'audience', who wait for the 'performance' to begin and, unless we are careful, or knowledgeable about the alternatives available to us, it is all too easy for the hour to be an opportunity for us to demonstrate our own skills and abilities for the delivery of, and engagement with, the subject matter. What happens on the stage, and in the lecture theatre or classroom itself, in part affects attendance, motivation and all manner of aspects which help (or hinder) our learners in their engagement with the subject matter, and each other. Participation, as well as other factors associated with engagement (or not), is a core theme linking the articles which comprise this issue.

Given that there are few opportunities for learners to speak in our classrooms, unless the numbers are very small and the educator particularly skilled, the 'silent participant' is familiar to us all. The authors of the first article, 'The silent participant in small group collaborative learning contexts', Louisa Remedios, David Clarke and Lesleyanne Hawthorne at the University of Melbourne, Australia, discuss this issue in relation to groupwork, where we often expect, or demand, that our learners speak, in the belief that speaking equals engagement, and that failing to speak signals a failure to wish to, or lack of ability to be able to, 'engage' in any way. As the authors rightly comment, the literature reflects the perception that quiet or silent students can be viewed as 'problematic', and silence perceived as failure of one sort or another. Whilst silence in a large lecture theatre is perhaps the only choice, even for the most vocal of learners, in the small group setting we expect, or even demand, that learners speak aloud. The

article discusses the reasons why certain students might be reluctant to do so, including the notion of 'cultural literacy', whether as a native speaker in their country of birth or otherwise. The article explores the behaviours of home and overseas students in the small group setting and takes a closer look at four 'silent participants' in particular in order to better understand the reasons for their silence. The authors rightly conclude that we, as educators, need to be absolutely clear about whether we wish our learners to learn the 'content' side of the subject matter or whether we are instead seeking to improve their skills in speaking aloud. Whilst both are concerned with learning, we must not forget that we are most likely going to assess our learners at some point. It is therefore even more important that we are clear about whether we are measuring, and assessing, their knowledge of the 'content' or instead their skills of the verbal delivery of that 'content', as these are two very different things. If we choose to help them to develop their skills of verbal delivery, then, as the authors rightly say, we need to help them to develop this skill, and not just force them to speak, in the hope that this, alone, will improve their skills.

The skill of speaking is, along with writing, one of production as opposed to one of comprehension. It is relatively easy to measure, and thus to assess, the speaking or writing skills of our learners should we choose to do so. Indeed, it is something that we need to consider very carefully when planning assessment tasks, and when marking them, as we need to be very clear as to how much emphasis we are placing on (and the marks we give for) the actual speaking or writing (the 'delivery') itself and how much weight (and the marks) we give to what they know, that is, the 'content'. Reading and listening are skills not of production but instead of comprehension, and are both as essential as those of production. The second article, entitled 'Listening to students: how to make written assessment feedback useful', by Agnes Rae and David Cochrane, looks at what we write to students in terms of feedback on their performance. As they rightly say, feedback is essential, and we often provide this in written form, for various reasons, pedagogic and other. The written medium is, however, an impoverished one, and it is thus not surprising that learners are not entirely happy with what we write. Whilst the authors say that our learners want feedback that is 'meaningful and constructive', which none of us would disagree with, what is 'meaningful' to one learner may not be so to another, and what is 'meaningful' to us may not be so to anyone else, learner or other. Written feedback is, then, necessarily problematic, for various reasons. One of the difficulties is reported by the authors, who say that in addition to (or instead of) providing feedback on their actual performance, feedback should instead (or also) be about 'growth rather than grading'. Whilst the authors say that 'justifying the mark awarded' is following

merely 'a traditional model' it is nonetheless what we are *required* to do, as we have to justify the marks not only to the student, but also to our institutions and to those who fund them in order to provide evidence of our quality of provision. So, there is a necessary tension between serving the needs of 'justifying the mark awarded' with that of providing feedback which, we hope, serves to help our learners to improve their future performance and/or which helps them to 'grow' as learners. Or, more accurately, to 'grow' as individuals, whether as students in higher education (a very short 'window' of learning, and in a formal setting) or as individuals per se. Whatever problems we, ourselves, create in terms of providing feedback that is less than 'meaningful and constructive', no one could argue that, if we are to do better, gathering data from students of their perceptions of our feedback will likely help us to improve it. To this end, the authors describe a study seeking to find out how useful students find written feedback on their assessment. The authors conclude with a heuristic model which may assist us in improving this vital aspect. Feedback, personalized or otherwise, to learners in a class of, say, 1,000 students is no easy task, and 'consistency' is naturally desirable but all the more difficult to achieve with multiple markers and with such large numbers of students, it might be argued. That said, feedback is certainly a vital aspect of helping our learners to reflect on their skills and abilities and to improve them, and there is likely much that we can learn and do in order to improve our own performance in providing it.

Feedback is provided in many ways, and feedback via the educator is but one of these. If, as argued in the previous article, feedback is about 'growth' not 'grading', then team/groupwork is a fertile environment for the 'growth' of an individual. Learning from each other is a means of learning both about oneself and also about others, and many might argue that our learners learn more from this than from any written feedback that we provide, however good it might be. As the authors of the third article rightly say, the ability to work effectively in a team/group setting is as important in the workplace as it is in higher education, and so it is no wonder that we, as educators, provide opportunities for students to develop the skills involved in teamwork. The article entitled 'Using action research to teach students to manage team learning and improve teamwork satisfaction', by Brenda Scott-Ladd and Christopher Chan, at Murdoch University, Australia, and York University, Canada, respectively, reports findings from a study which explores the strategies that learners use to develop their skills of working in a team/group. The authors provide an overview of the literature citing the unquestionable benefits of learning in teams/groups, 'a relatively safe environment' which allows learners to practise their skills, including those of cooperation and collaboration, resolving conflict, negotiating,

problem solving, critical thinking, and others. Vitally, say the authors, team/groupwork builds that which is not easily taught, namely, 'self-efficacy, self-worth and adaptability', and the importance of feeling 'connected to each other, with a sense of working toward a shared, time-bounded goal'. That said, all of us would readily agree that 'the reality for many students falls short of this', despite our best efforts. The 'problems', say the authors, concern 'the team process, member expectations and the logistics of coordinating activities', which they describe further. The approach designed to minimize these problems, described in the article, centres on the need for us to better set up the tasks in the first place and to teach learners to better manage the processes.

Working in a team/group setting can be a very positive one for many learners, but for others it can be very demotivating indeed. What motivates, and demotivates, our learners is the subject of the fourth article, 'The importance of establishing relevance in motivating student learning' by David Kember, Amber Ho and Celina Hong at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. All too easily can we, the educators, demotivate our learners, despite wishing and trying to do the very opposite, say the authors. Citing and discussing the literature on motivation, the authors raise the issues of three types of motivation, namely, goal types, sources of enjoyment and general motivation to learn, as well as the four motivational conditions of interest, relevance, expectancy and satisfaction. The article is particularly concerned with the relevance aspect here, which is argued to be an area that has not been given sufficient prominence in the literature. To this end, the authors report a study seeking to provide a characterization of the learning/teaching environments which might provide the capability of motivating or demotivating learners. The findings suggest that we need to revisit 'the traditional building block curriculum' and, in particular, to focus our attention on the early stages of a degree programme, regardless of discipline. The lecture, still the norm in higher education, has the potential to motivate/inspire, but also to do the very opposite. We can all think back to our school or university days and recall the inspiring, superb teacher x or the dull and dreary teacher y; these stick in our memories even if, as time goes on, what they were actually delivering, content-wise, is unable to be recalled. No wonder, then, that the use of lectures is 'heavily criticized from an andragogical viewpoint', says Benjamin Dyson, author of the fifth and final article, entitled 'Assessing small-scale interventions in large-scale teaching: a general methodology and preliminary data'. Dyson rightly says that educators have a challenge on their hands 'to provide opportunities for active learning during these sessions' if we are to better engage them. Providing a detailed critique of the lecture, and the notions of active and passive learning, the author rightly concludes that many of us

have much to learn in order to improve the experience that both learner and teacher have of being in the lecture theatre. However, if we are teaching large numbers of students, this is no mean feat. The author cites literature showing that, whilst many of us now employ technology to assist in this, there are more 'low-tech solutions', and these are termed 'interactive windows'. These might involve giving handouts to students to complete, buzz groups and other groupwork, or 'just' having a break. The focus of this article is, however, on three 'interventions', each providing a one-minute 'interactive window'. These 'interventions' were designed to take place approximately 20, 30 and 40 minutes into the lecture, and data were gathered over a five-week period. We might make our lectures 'much more useful in terms of student learning' says the author, which can be only a good thing. The results of this study, and indeed the article itself, make for absorbing reading.